

First-generation Immigrant College Students: An Exploration of Family Support and
Career Aspirations

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Dedication

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Abstract

Although there is a large body of literature on first-generation college students and an emerging literature on immigrant college students, research focused on the combined experiences of college students who are both immigrant and first-generation is limited. College students who have the combined status of being first-generation and an immigrant are burden with additional challenging navigating the college process, finding resources and balancing their dream and goals with those of their family to name a few. These students pursue higher education as a means to improve their family's socioeconomic status (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), which makes choosing a college major and career path an important decision.

The purpose of this study is to understand how do first-generation immigrant college students decide on a college major, make career decisions, and receive support from their parent(s) and family. Guided by Symbolic Interaction Theory and Phenomenology, fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-generation immigrant college students. Two super-ordinate themes emerged from the data: *What I Want as a Student* and *What I Need to Succeed*, from these there were four themes and twelve subthemes. The results of this study can be used to help advisers understand this student population and how to better work with them.

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Introduction

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that 63 percent of all new jobs would require a postsecondary degree (Rothkopf, 2009), making that credential a necessity in today's economic environment. With the increasing push to obtain a college degree, more first-generation college students are pursuing that goal. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 23-24 percent of college freshmen are first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The definition of first-generation college students varies and includes students whose parents have no education post high school and those whose parents do not have a 4-year degree (Billson & Terry, 1982; Soria & Stebleton, 2013a, Soria & Stebleton, 2013b). Parental education levels positively correlate to the educational attainment of their children (Sirin, 2005), thus these students are entering an arena unknown to them or their parents. While first-generation college students are achieving their goals, they face many barriers in their pursuit of a college education.

Compared to their non-first-generation counterparts, first-generation students are more likely to be older, to be from a minority background, to have a disability (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Hertel, 1992), to be female, and to be non-native speakers of English (Choy 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Moreover, first-generation college students tend to be from low-income families with household incomes less than \$25,000 (Choy, 2001). These students are likely to be employed at least part-time while in college and are often financially independent from their parents (Bui 2002; Jehangir, 2010b).

Academic preparation is a struggle; many of these students have weak English and math skills, as well as poor study skills (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a). These students are often less prepared academically (Bartholomae, 1985; Thayer, 2000) and when compared to non-first-generation peers, they are twice as likely to leave college before their second year (Choy, 2001). Those continuing after the second year of college still face an uphill battle to graduate. DeFranke, Hurtado, Pryor, and Tran (2011) found that within four years, only 27.4 percent of the first-generation students earned a Bachelor's degree; in comparison, 42 percent of their non-first generation peers had received their degrees. In six years, the completion rate had increased to 50 percent but still lagged behind that of non-first generation students (64 percent). Literature has shown first-generation students are also less likely to form connections with other students through participating in student groups and interacting with faculty members (Kim, 2009). Time constraints and living off campus might be contributing factors for the lack of integration into the college experience (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Less integration may also contribute to the lower retention and matriculation of first-generation students.

Being the first in their immediate family to attend college means these students have to navigate the college admission process without the help of their parents (Choy, 2001). Because their parents do not have the expertise to help them once they are accepted into college, first-generation students have to figure out the steps necessary to be successful on their own (Varga, 2004). Additionally, these students struggle with balancing their responsibilities in terms of meeting family, work, and coursework

expectations (Jehangir, 2010a; Jehangir, 2010b; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Soria and Stebleton, 2013a).

Embedded within this large group of first-generation college students are students who are from *first- or second-generation immigrant* families who face additional barriers in their pursuit of higher education. First-generation immigrants are those individuals who immigrated to the United States when they are older than age 17; second-generation refers to individuals who were either born in the United States or immigrated to the United States prior to age 7 (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Immigrant college students are more likely to begin their postsecondary journey at a community college and then transfer to a 4-year college (Mumper, 2003). This too affects their academic and social integration into the college environment. Many immigrant college students are also the first in their family to pursue postsecondary education. They face difficulties similar to the challenges of first-generation college students; their challenges include lack of information about college options, understanding financial aid and paying for college, being less academically prepared with poor English reading, and writing and math skills (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2013b). Immigrant college students also struggle with determining family involvement, and balancing familial and job responsibilities (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Gildersleeve, 2010; Kilbride & D' Arcangelo, 2002).

Using data from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, Soria and Stebleton (2013) compared immigrant (first and second generations) and non-immigrant college students. They found that immigrant students reported higher

levels of family responsibilities; this manifested to be an obstacle to their academic success. This study also found that these students lacked study skills and had poor study behaviors. When compared to their non-immigrant peers, immigrant students were also more stressed and depressed; this served as a barrier to their academic success.

Because parents of immigrant college students have highly positive attitudes toward postsecondary education and its potential for upward mobility in the United States, many immigrant college students have higher educational expectations placed on them than do their native-born peers (Schneider & Lee, 1990). Student aspirations along with parental expectations directly impacted the success and academic performance of the student (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). A study of Latino youths conducted by Suarez-Oriozco and Suarez-Oriozco (1995) found that the determination to succeed was related to the sacrifices made by families to enable their children to have a better life. Students were constantly reminded of the importance of education and the need to study and do well in school to prepare for college (Auerbach, 2006). While growing up in an environment where children of immigrants are encouraged to pursue college education is positive, the student faces tremendous pressure to be successful.

Receiving family support is important for all students, but when immigrant students experience changes in their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, they may find that their ideas have become inconsistent with those of their families and communities; it can lead to conflict in the family system (Harklau, 1998). Although immigrant families are supportive of their children's educational aspirations (Kim & Diaz, 2013), this does

not mean these students will have fewer family obligations while they are attending college (Howard, 2001; Jehangir, 2010b). These obligations may create tension as students are torn between the demands of their home and family versus those of their academic programs.

Another area of stress experienced by immigrant students comes from the pressure they feel to both succeed academically and contribute financially to their families (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Kim, 2009). Many immigrant students were raised in poverty. Borjas (2011) found that when compared to their native-born peers, immigrant students were 15 percent more likely to live in poverty. When the *first-generation college student* and *immigrant* statuses are combined, these students face many challenges in their pursuit of postsecondary education.

Significance of the Research

Although there is a large body of literature on first-generation college students and an emerging literature on immigrant college students, research focused on the combined experiences of college students who are both immigrant and first-generation is limited. With over 38 million foreign-born individuals currently living in the United States and the number expected to grow faster than other segments of the population by 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.), children of these immigrant families will increasingly be pursuing higher education as a means to improve their family's socioeconomic status (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Currently it is estimated that over 12 percent of the undergraduate population are immigrant learners (Kim, 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2013b). However, the existing body

of research on this population is still quite limited. The postsecondary experiences of this group of students are unique. In order to facilitate the successful degree completion of these students, it requires a better understanding of their experiences. Specifically, little is known about their process of selecting a college major and career path. As they establish their unique identities and develop their career paths, there is also a need to better understand these first-generation immigrant students' experiences of family, and support.

This study aimed to address the aforementioned research gap by exploring the career aspirations of first-generation immigrant students and their perceived family support through their postsecondary educational journey. Thus the purpose of this study is to understand how do first-generation immigrant college students decide on a college major, make career decisions, and receive support from their parent(s) and family.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interaction theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) guided the conceptualization of this project. The theory asserts that human actions toward an object or thing are based on the meaning they assign to that object or thing. Meaning is created through interactions with others and the meaning of a thing or object can be modified through interaction. Grounded in this theoretical framework, questions were designed to elicit student descriptions of their lived-experiences related to college and their family. Being a first-generation immigrant college student means breaking barriers to achieve both their own dreams and those of their family. For the purposes of this study, *first-generation immigrant college students* were defined as those students whose parents did

not have a Bachelor's degree and were first-or-second generation immigrant (Jehangir, 2010a; Jehangir, 2010b; Soria & Stebleton, 2013a; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

As first-generation immigrant college students pursue their bachelor's, they are creating meaning from this experience for themselves and their family. Both the student and their family assign meaning to the college experience, and through their interaction, create different or similar meanings for the experience.

Literature Review

The literature focusing on first-generation immigrant college students is limited. Studies generally focus on one category, first-generation students, immigrant students, or students of color; they rarely include the unique combination of first-generation and immigrant statuses (Flores & O'Brien, 2002; Ishitani, 2008; Maramba, 2008; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999; Trusty, 2002; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Moreover, the research on parental support and its impact on college student adjustment are limited (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). Therefore, the following literature review draws from studies of first-generation college students, immigrants and ethnic minority students to provide the context for the current study.

Family Support

First-generation college students are educational pioneers in their families. Receiving family support is therefore vital to their postsecondary success. Research has shown that family support has a greater stress-reducing impact for first-generation college students than for their non-first-generation peers (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Although Winkle-Wagner (2009) found that maintaining ties to family promoted

student success, other research found that Hispanic community college students, some of who were first-generation, were more successful when they severed ties with family members (Feibig, Braid, Ross, Tom, and Prinzo, 2010).

More consistency was found in the literature in that first-generation students lack family guidance and advice about the college experience from their parents since the parents had no college experience themselves. Parents wanted their children to achieve their career goals; however, the parents had limited or no understanding of what it took to get there (Hertel, 2002; Hodge & Mellin, 2010; Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). Students felt their own personal pressure as well as parental pressure to maintain good grades while adjusting to college life. A study by Maramba (2008) of immigrant Filipino American women, 56 percent of whom were first-generation college students, indicated that achieving good grades was a way for college students to pay back parents for the sacrifices the parents had made. Maramba (2008) concluded that students wanted parents to understand their struggles as they blazed unfamiliar trails; they wanted their parents to offer understanding instead of putting pressure on them.

As students adjust to their new academic environment, maintaining connection with family can be challenging. The emotional disconnect can lead first-generation students to perceive lower levels of family support and frustration with family members for the lack of understanding of the student's situation, particularly the day to day challenges the student was facing (Billson & Terry, 1982; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hodge & Mellin, 2010; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). This disconnect may lead to feelings of sadness and anxiety in the student (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). The

disconnection can grow even greater as students integrate new dimensions to their original cultural and family identities; this may be especially true when these new dimensions are unfamiliar to their parents. When this occurs, students may disclose less about the college experience to their families than other students whose parents were college educated (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). In spite of these challenges, first-generation students who reported a secure and supportive relationship with their parents were more satisfied with their college experience and were more successful (Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004).

An additional challenge faced by first-generation students occurs when their parents do not have the financial resources to help lessen the student stress level (Hertel, 2002). First-generation students are likely to work longer hours and have greater familial responsibilities (Barry, et al., 2009). Those who were fortunate to receive financial support from family valued it and attributed this type of support to lessening their stress levels (Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevin, & Toews, 2007).

Career Aspirations

The research on selection and commitment to a career path for adolescents is substantial (Grotevant, Cooper, & Kramer, 1986; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Pinquart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2004); but, the majority of this research is focused on the influences of cognitive processes or personality traits (Galotti, 1999; Costa, McRae, & Kay, 1995; Grotevant et al., 1986; Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004; Sullivan & Hansen, 2004). Families have been shown to have a significant impact on career development (Gravino, 2002; Huang, 2001; Orndorff & Herr, 1996; Whitson, 1996; Wistson & Keller,

2004). However, there is limited research that explores this phenomenon for first-generation immigrant college students. The following section reviews studies on factors related to college major and career selection for first-generation college students and particularly those of ethnic minorities.

Many college students are confronted with the challenge of balancing their own individual vocational interests with an option that is acceptable to their parents (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). A study conducted by Fisher and Padmawidjaja (1999) showed that African-American and Mexican-American students felt the need to choose an academic major that was acceptable to their parent(s). Intergenerational conflict is likely to arise if student's career goals are not congruent with their parent's goals (Lee & Liu, 2001; Yingvi, 2009). Moreover, if that perceived incongruence exists and family conflict arises, students may become indecisive about their career choices and experience psychological distress (Constantine & Flores, 2006). This can also result in strained relationships with their parents (Lucas, Skokowski, & Ancis, 2000).

Several studies point to the importance that parents of first-generation immigrant students, particularly those of Asian origin, place on the potential for financial stability in their children's chosen career (Dundes, Cho, & Kwak, 2009; Hodge, & Mellin, 2010; Yang & Feng, 2004; Kiang, 1992; Xie & Goyette, 2003). Additionally, careers perceived to have prestige and independence were emphasized over those that offered enjoyment (Akins, 2007). Conflicts arise when students choose majors unfamiliar to parents (Hodge & Melin, 2010) or careers in the humanities or education fields as opposed to those in

health and sciences (Dundes, et al, 2009; Yang & Feng, 2004; Kiang, 1992; Xie & Goyette, 2003).

Interestingly, it was the students who pursued majors in humanities and the social sciences who were most likely to continue on that path until graduation; 70 percent of students did not change their major after four years (Syed, 2010). In contrast, 50 percent of the students who matriculated with a major in science, technology, engineering, or technology (STEM) fields switched within four years. In contrast to white students, all of the students who switched out of STEM fields were ethnic minorities (Syed, 2010). The ethnic minority students who switched out of STEM fields cited poor performance in coursework and their desire to pursue a career through which they could give back to their families and local communities. These students also developed a more integrated sense of self and became aware of their ethnicity through their college journey. Although students of color are expected to choose lucrative, prestigious careers as opposed to community-based work (Gordon, 2002), many students dread the idea of working just for a paycheck; they also want a feeling of fulfillment from their careers (Fujii, 2012).

Choosing a college major and a career path is a challenging process for all young adults who pursue a postsecondary degree. But this process is made even more complex for first-generation immigrant students whose parents do not understand the college experience while still having high expectations for their child's academic success in college and financial success in their career. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation immigrant college students a) decisions

about college major and career path, b) influences of the family on these decisions, and c) family support along the college journey.

Method

Approach. A phenomenological approach was employed in this study in order to learn more about the lived-experiences of first-generation immigrant college students in the context of career aspirations and family support while they were pursuing postsecondary education. Phenomenology is focused on finding the meaning or essence of lived-experience of persons as created by their subjective realities. How a phenomenon is experienced emerges from consciousness; the focus is not on *what* is experienced but rather on *how* it is experienced. How persons make meaning from experiencing an event is the key focus of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

This study sought to understand the lived-experiences of first-generation immigrant college student decision-making as it pertained to choosing a college major and determined their career path; it also explored how their families supported them as they traversed this path. The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved this study (study number 1205P13762).

Recruitment. The recruitment goal of this study was to include a diverse group of students in order to capture the cultural variation in immigrant student career aspirations and their experiences of family support. Using a purposive snowball sampling procedure, a team of three graduate students, including the principal investigator, and two senior-level undergraduate students recruited participants between May and November 2012.

All team members (two males and three females) were first-generation immigrant college students themselves.

Eligibility criteria for this study were: 1. The first person in the family pursuing a Bachelor's degree, 2. Students were first-or-second generation immigrants 3. Parents did not have a Bachelor's degree. (See Appendix A and B for recruitment email and flyer sent to potential participants.) In all recruitment efforts, the nature and goals of the study were explained to potential participants. Multiple strategies described below were used to recruit participants:

1) *Recruitment through student support service program:* Contact was made with student support services at the University of Minnesota to recruit participants: Federally funded TRIO (TRIO) student support services program, Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence (MCAE), and the Martin Luther King Jr. Program. These programs were chosen because they serve a diverse group of students based on ethnicity, generation status, and income.

Because their primary target audience is first-generation college students and immigrants, TRIO student support service program was chosen as the main recruitment vehicle. Three emails were sent to students via the TRIO listserv in June, August, and September of 2012. In addition, one recruitment email was sent to listservs of MCAE and Martin Luther King, Jr. program groups.

2) *Recruitment through on-campus student groups:* In addition to the programs mentioned above, participants were recruited through student groups at the University of Minnesota: Hmong Minnesota Student Association, Hmong Men's Circle, Viivncaus-

Hmong Women's Group, and Asian Student Union. Various members of the research team belonged to these groups and were able to garner their assistance in recruiting participants for the study.

3) *In-person recruitment*: The research team recruited in-person from the Ronald McNair Scholar program and two family social science courses. Students were given details about the project, the eligibility criteria, and the researcher's contact information. They were asked to contact the researcher if they met the eligibility criteria and were interested in participating. A sign-up sheet was passed around in the summer research program and in one of the family social science courses.

4) *Recruitment via referral*: The final method used was referrals; participants who were part of the study told friends about the project and they in turn contacted the research team.

Recruitment efforts yielded 45 potential participants, 14 through in-person class visits, 27 through emails sent to TRIO student support and on-campus student groups, and three through referral by past participants.

Interviews were conducted with 17 participants. Three interviews were not used in analysis for the following reasons: 1) Midway through an interview it was discovered that one person did not meet the eligibility criteria. 2) The interview was halted by mutual agreement of the PI and the participant who was unable to respond to the questions due to limited English-speaking skills and whose emotional distress was clearly evident. 3) It became clear in the interview that the participant was an international

student and not a first-generation immigrant college student living in the United States with parents.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggested a sample size of three to six, while Creswell (1998) suggested 5 to 25 interviews with no new emerging themes. The final sample of this study included 14 participants because at this point, no new themes were emerging (Morse, 1986; Seidman, 2006).

Participants. Based on self-reported data, nine (63.4%) participants were female and five (35.7%) were males. Their ages ranged from 18-28 years with a mean age of 21.29, (SD = 2.50). Nine of the fourteen participants were born outside the United States. The mean age of arrival in the U.S. was 11.64 (SD=4.88), with a range of 1 -17 years old. The remaining five were students whose parents had immigrated to the U.S. (See Table 1 for country of birth.)

Thirteen (92.9%) of the participants were single; one was married and had children. Ten of fourteen (71.4%) participants were employed and working at least part time. Four (28.6%) were not employed. One person reported no income, 28.6 percent of the participants' household incomes were less than \$16, 000, 28.6% between \$16,001 and \$30, 000, 21.4% between \$30, 001 and \$75, 000, 7.1% above \$75, 000. One participant did not respond to the question.

Three (21.4%) participants were college freshman, three (21.4%) were sophomores, four (28.6%) were juniors, and four (28.6%) were seniors. Five of fourteen (35.7%) participants lived on the university campus, seven (50.0%) lived with parents, and two (14.3%) lived off campus. Of the 14 participants in the study, eight had changed

their major(s) from the time they started college to when the data was collected. Three remained in their chosen major and three were still undecided. Of the three participants who were undecided, two were freshman and one was a sophomore; one of the participants that remained in their major was also a freshman. One participant changed college majors, but did not change his/her career aspiration; another whose major did not change had changed his/her career aspiration. (See Table 2 for living arrangements and college majors). Finally, all fourteen participants paid for college with a combination of loans, grants, scholarships, work, and parental support.

Interviews. Training: The research team was trained on the interview protocol by the principal investigator (PI), her faculty advisor, and a 4th-year graduate student team member. First, the research team read and discussed three research articles that focused on using semi-structured interviews to collect data. Interview strategies were highlighted and the faculty advisor answered questions. Then, while the faculty advisor observed and provided suggestions for improvement, the team members practiced interviewing each other using the interview protocol. (See Appendix C for interview protocol.) Next, two-person teams completed the first three interviews; this enabled each interviewer to give and receive feedback until they felt comfortable conducting interviews on their own.

Interview process: All interviews were conducted in private rooms on the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities campus. The consent form was reviewed immediately prior to the interview; this document highlighted potential risks and benefits of participation as well as the participant's right to decline to answer any questions, the right to refuse to be part of the study, and the right to halt the interview at any time.

Participants were told that the interview would be audio recorded. They were also given a chance to ask questions and share any concerns. When all questions and concerns were addressed and if the participants still wanted to proceed with the study, they were asked to sign the consent form. They were also given a copy of the form to keep for their records (See Appendix D). After participants signed the consent form, they were asked to complete a short demographic survey (See Appendix E). Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. The PI completed thirteen interviews and an undergraduate team member completed four; teams of two completed three of the seventeen interviews. The PI was present during all three of the two-team members' interviews. After completing the interview, participants were compensated \$15 to thank them for their time.

Transcription and Translation. The researcher, three graduate students, and one undergraduate student transcribed the interviews. Thirteen of the fourteen interviews were in English and one was completed in both English and Hmong. An undergraduate team member who was fluent in both Hmong and English transcribed the Hmong-English interview. To ensure trustworthiness in this phase of the research process, the PI audited six (42.8%) of the interview transcriptions to check for accuracy.

Data Analysis. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze interview data. IPA is not a prescriptive approach to data analysis; it offers guidelines, which can be adapted by the individual researcher (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Following is a step-by-step explanation of the data analysis process used in this study.

After all of the transcripts were transcribed verbatim, 1) the principal investigator (PI) read the transcribed text to gain familiarity and engage with the data. 2) The next step involved rereading the transcript, highlighting key words and phrases that stood out as meaning units. The PI also made note of any similarities, differences, or incoherency in the text. Next, the PI added two columns to the Word documents; the second column to the right of the text was labeled “Core Ideas”, and the third column was labeled “Emerging Themes.” 3) The researcher then went through the transcripts again, specifically looking at the highlighted text and interpreted why this text was important in the “core ideas” column. After interpreting the core ideas, the PI went back to the beginning of the transcript and began delineating “emerging themes” from the core ideas. These steps were repeated for all fourteen transcripts and allowed for additional emerging themes to develop. Given that the phenomenon was focused on understanding career aspirations and family support, many of the emerging themes were related to these issues. 4) After all of the transcripts were analyzed for emerging themes, separate documents were then created for each separate emerging theme and core ideas were transferred into these documents. For example, all core ideas related to the emerging theme “Major” were put into one document so that the connections within this emerging theme became evident across all cases. The final step of analysis involved reading the document of emerging themes and looking for connections and patterns across all cases to create the final themes.

Trustworthiness. The author utilized multiple approaches to assure trustworthiness through the research process. Several people provided feedback on the

research design and questions. They included research team members, a peer who provided emic perspectives (representing the study's target population of first-generation immigrant college students), and the author's advisor who provided an etic or outsider's perspective.

In the analysis process, the author worked intensively with her advisor to verify her interpretations of the lived-experiences of the first-generation immigrant college students. Writing the results was an iterative process of verifying and re-verifying interpretations with the data (Flowers, et al, 2009). After the results were finalized and in order to strengthen and clarify results, the author incorporated feedback from two members of the research team and two colleagues that were first-generation immigrant college students, but not part of the research team.

The Researcher's Personal Experiences. Because of her personal experience as a first-generation immigrant college student, the author chose to study the phenomenon of selecting a college major and career path as well as the meaning of the family support given to first-generation immigrant college students. As the first-born daughter of an immigrant family and the first in her family to obtain a Bachelor's degree, she realized that this journey was complex and warranted scholarly exploration. She had experienced difficulty changing her college major and career path after realizing that her initial choice was not a good fit for her. Because my parents did not understand her choice to change majors, the experience fractured her relationship with her father and negatively affected how her family supported my postsecondary education journey.

As she started the data collection process for this study and began to find first-generation immigrant college students with similar experiences, she was skeptical. Although, she was aware that many participants would have similar experiences to her, as a new researcher, she wanted to be certain that the data reflected the lived-experience of participants and that she was not projecting her experiences in the interviews. To assure this was not happening, she met weekly with her research team to reflect on her experiences of conducting the interviews. Additionally, she had weekly meetings with her advisor to talk about the data collection process and to reflect on the data collected.

Results

This study aimed to capture the lived-experiences of fourteen first-generation immigrant college students as they navigated their paths to educational success. Breaking barriers and pursuing their goal of attaining a Bachelor's degree from a 4-year institution was a success for the participants in this study. It is important to note that when referring to participants, "a few" indicates three to five participants, "some or several" refers to six or nine participants and "many or majority" signifies ten or more participants.

Two super-ordinate themes emerged from the data: *What I Want as a Student* and *What I Need to Succeed*. *What I Want as a Student* is divided into two themes: aspirations and influences. Aspirations captured what participants hoped to accomplish by attaining a bachelor's degree. This theme is made up of four subthemes, a) academically challenging, b) building stronger communities, c) getting a college degree and leading by example, and d) balancing career satisfaction and financial security. Influences captured factors that impacted participants as they chose college majors and

career paths. The theme influences, is composed of two subthemes, a) parental expectations and b) significant non-family life events.

What I Need to Succeed identifies resources and support systems participants relied on for help to achieve their goals and is comprised by two themes: family support and non-family support. Family support is comprised of six subthemes, a) encouragement and motivation, b) unconditional support, c) wanting parents to understand, d) difference in support by parents, e) small things matter (tangible support), and f) sibling support. (See Figure 1 for organization of themes.)

What I Want as a Student

First-generation immigrant college students who participated in this study had high aspirations for their futures. These aspirations had been influenced by two primary sources, their own experiences growing up and their parents' expectations for them. These two influences were sometimes in conflict. This prompted the students to weigh the relative importance of and to consider both their personal desires and those of their parents as they made education and career decisions. Students had to balance their own ambitions and goals with their parent's expectations.

Aspirations. This theme captures the factors first-generation immigrant college students considered when deciding college majors and career paths post-graduation. The narratives from participants revealed that many participants entered college with a career path already in mind and contemplated majors that would help them to achieve their career goals. As participants pursued coursework, some realized that their intended career path was not the best option for them when a) they did not succeed in coursework, or b)

they realized that they had little to no interest in that field. As a result, these participants started to explore college majors based on their strengths; they talked to advisors and friends and they enrolled in exploratory courses to find a college major that was a better fit. Participant narratives revealed several major and career expectations that they aspired to have: a) they wanted majors that were intellectually stimulating, b) that utilized personal strengths, and c) that facilitated giving back to both their families and communities. They also sought majors that d) led to jobs where they had the potential to earn a stable income. These expectations are further explored below.

a) *Academically Challenging.* Participants reported that they sought a major that would challenge them intellectually, inspire passion and promote life-long learning. Majors they mentioned included child psychology, youth studies, and neurobiology; these allowed participants to use critical thinking skills and to utilize their curiosity. One participant, Tigist, started college with the intention of becoming a nurse; however, she soon realized that the medical environment was not ideal for her. She decided to pursue a degree in child psychology instead.

I really want to do nursing; but then I seem to realize that it's not [right for me]. I don't fit in there. I kind of enjoy critical thinking.... psychology. It's kind of interesting, so that's what I chose to do. Tigist (Ethiopian Female)

Some participants were still exploring majors and appeared more open to continued exploration and change. Jose initially enrolled in biochemistry; but found coursework in that major did not challenge him. As a result, he changed his major:

I want to do something that challenges me and keeps on challenging me. So I think [about] the business part of [neuroscience], ... it's always challenging and [especially so] if you combine it with research. Jose (Mexican Male)

b) *Building Stronger Communities.* One particularly strong thread woven throughout the narratives of the first-generation immigrant college students was that many participants chose majors or career goals based on their desire to create stronger communities. Participants were quite similar in their desire to give back to and strengthen respective cultures and communities; they were passionate about making a difference with their education and training. Participants realized that their family issues were similar to those of others in their communities. By helping their families, they were helping their communities. YengKong recalled that his inability to help his mother with dental problems led to his desire to become a dentist:

I had to see [my mother] cry [about] her toothache and see she hasn't eat for a week because of her teeth...I feel like I'm pretty young at the time; but I want to do something that relates to [this] to help my people. When I got older, I started to see [other] people having the same problem. YengKong (Hmong Male)

Witnessing his mother in pain from a toothache was a salient experience for YengKong. He knew that dental problems were widespread in the Hmong community and wanted to help.

Another community challenge participants wanted to address was the intergenerational conflict they experienced and witnessed. They explained that often parent-child conflicts arose when the child tried to deviate from their culture of origin and

adapt to the dominant culture. Often their parents did not understand why the child would choose to do so. Participants shared that this conflict sometimes led to delinquent behaviors and frequently led to strained relationships with their parent(s). WangMeng explained the essence of this intergenerational conflict and how he wanted to help:

I wanted to try and help out my family cause its pretty hard having parents that don't understand the times. It seems that my parents are stuck in Laos; they are very traditional and it's very hard for my sister... to adapt to the western culture because of that. I had three friends that were involved in gangs. Part of the reason [was] their dad and mom didn't understand who they were; they were very traditional, uptight. I just want to do something to help out my community, to help out the children. WangMeng (Hmong Male)

On a personal level, WangMeng was trying to reduce his own family conflict by helping his younger sister with chores, allowing her to focus on her homework. Because housework is typically relegated to girls and women, he was pushing the traditional gender role boundaries of his parents and those of the Hmong community in general. He went on to explain how he wanted to create a safe place where Hmong youths could express their thoughts and opinions and develop a sense of community away from home.

[I want to create] something that would keep [youths] away from drugs, gang involvement, or something like that. Somewhere where they can find a close community and kids just like themselves, where they can express who they are. Cause I think Hmong kids aren't able to express who they are at home.

WangMeng (Hmong Male)

c) Getting a College Degree: Leading by Example. Participants noted that in their parents' generation, few people of their respective immigrant communities had attended college or pursued a professional career. Although there were notable cases of community members becoming doctors, lawyers, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, and engineers, other examples of professional roles were lacking. As a result, several participants expressed a desire to be role models in their family and communities. The majority of the participants in this study came from homes where their parents expected them to pursue a career in the medical field; however the parents were often oblivious to what that meant in terms of time commitment, cost, capability, and motivation.

More prestigious jobs like doctors and lawyers that the Hmong community really respects... being a doctor and a lawyer is prestigious; but sometimes, I don't know if they really grasp the concept of the fact that you have to go to school for so long. And you take [out] so many loans that even if you are making money you are actually not really making money...because you are paying back so many loans. Sometimes, I don't think they grasp [this]. Ying (Hmong Female)

Majors and careers paths that were less familiar to parents were seen as less desirable. Participants felt they were pushed to consider only a narrow range of options. This limited understanding of their possibilities led participants to aspire to serve as role models to others in their communities; they wanted to show that one could be successful in other professions. They wanted to show that other careers could also allow one to achieve financial stability, a common concern of parents in immigrant communities.

Participants also wanted to serve as role models to inspire others in their community to pursue the American dream. As first-generation immigrant college students, participants carried the burden of needing to create the map to a Bachelor's degree for their siblings and future generations. Because many participants were from lower-income families, they also felt a burden to be financially successful and break the cycle of poverty for their family.

I guess you can say that indirectly my [siblings are] my inspiration to... succeed; I want to set a good example for them, and I want to show them that they can do more with their lives than just being trapped in the cycle of poverty. GaoJer (Hmong Female)

Being a role model was important to participants because it elevated the status of their community as a whole. Ying wants to pursue a PhD, not only for her personal fulfillment, but because she knows that this achievement would make her parents and community proud. She hoped that youths from her own Hmong community would see her success and also start dreaming of obtaining doctoral degrees. Ying would like to be able to serve as a resource for the younger generation as they pursued their own goal. Ying explained what this dream would mean to her:

I think it would mean so much to my parents if I was to get my PhD; it'll mean so much to my community...seeing that I am a woman of color and I got my PhD. You know what that would do for other youth? Who didn't see [education] as an option; but after seeing someone like me do it, [they could] begin contemplating it. Ying (Hmong Female)

WangMeng also articulated the importance of having role models in his Hmong community:

We don't have our own country; so we have nothing to look up to or look forward to. So, I guess having someone that is high up in the community is something that would raise the status of our community. We have someone that's a doctor or you know... look up to her. Like Senator Ming Mao...my mom would always brag about her and talk about her and how great she was. WangMeng (Hmong Male)

Leading by example was important to participants. They saw themselves as paving the path for others; they were conscious of every decision made and the impact it would have on themselves, their families, and their communities. As role models, they wanted to leave a legacy for future generations.

d) *Balancing career satisfaction and financial security.* The majority of the participants in this study articulated the importance of providing for themselves and their families while having a satisfactory career. However, parents of these first-generation immigrant college students were focused primarily on the goal of financial security; they definitely wanted their children to pursue majors and careers that would lead to financial stability and success. Parents encouraged children to pursue majors in the medical and engineering fields because they were familiar with those careers. There was a clear set of potential jobs connected to these majors and those jobs were typically paid well. But, as participants honed in on what they really wanted to pursue and often switched from majors that were familiar to their parents to ones that were unfamiliar, the students had to negotiate these new choices with their parents.

It's important to note, however, that the desire for getting jobs that led to financial security was not only a goal for parents, but also for the students themselves. Having grown up in families where finances were scarce, participants in this study wanted to attain well-paying jobs and long-term financial security; they did not want to face the same struggles as their parents. For those who were pursuing majors in which a Bachelor's degree would not lead to well-paying jobs by their own standards, this meant that they would most likely need to pursue a Master's or higher degree to achieve both career satisfaction and financial security goals. Participants were comfortable with that requirement. The internal struggle to balance career satisfaction with financial security goals is reflected in the following quotes:

I think I might be leaning more toward making more money because of growing up in a household where money is kind of a problem and it's not stable. Then it's more important to find a job that [would] give me...enough money so I can support myself. But at the same time, I have to like the job; because right now, I have work-study so I work as a custodian and I hate, oh my God, I hate it! But I'm just doing it because I needed the money...I don't want to do something like that for the rest of my life and be sick of it and tired of it. Houa (Hmong Female)

What I'm doing might get me some money; but at the same time, it should be what you are interested [in doing]; money comes and goes. If I go to grad school and [become] a counselor, I might [not] be able to [make as much] money as if I

do nursing. So I'm thinking not [as much about the money]; but that it's what I wanted to do [that] is important to me. Tigist (Ethiopian Female)

If the funding gets cut [for a youth worker] then I [would] lose my job; so just having that security job of being a counselor is a little easier. I If I decide that I don't want to be a counselor, I can still be like a youth worker at a program. Ying (Hmong Female)

Although participants did not want to face the same financial struggles as their parents, having career satisfaction was just as important to them as financial success. Several participants were very cognizant of the sacrifices their parents had made so their children had opportunities and a better life in the United States. Students understood that their parents' had a limited understanding of career options. They were in sync with their parents about the desire to earn a degree that would lead to a well-paying job.

Participants were also very aware that their personal career aspirations did not always neatly align with both job satisfactions and income stability. As a result, they seriously considered their parents' career expectations in light of their own desires; they were cognizant of being careful not to disappoint their parents as noted by Hein.

You don't want to disappoint them [parents]...there's no reason to disappoint [them]. They are your parents; they gave birth to you; they raised you. What is your reason for disappointing them? You should give [them] respect and just pay [them back for all of the] time they been raising you. Hein (Vietnamese Female)

Influences. Decisions about college major and career path are not made in a vacuum. The theme Influences is used to represent the factors students considered while choosing a college major and/or career path. There are two subthemes, Parental Expectations and Significant Lived-experiences.

a) Parental expectations. Parents wanted their children to achieve the American Dream, which was described by participants as “earning a high income and having the ability to provide for themselves and their families.” Unfamiliar majors like child psychology were perceived to be inappropriate since parents could not see a specific job that paid well or provided job security. This was particularly true as compared to jobs in the medical field or being an engineer. Majors unfamiliar to parents were seen as lower status and a waste of time. Several participants shared that their parents had expressed disapproval when the student selected what the parents considered to be college majors that did not lead to a career path of which the parents had knowledge. A few students felt that their parents pressured them to change their major and career path. One student who was pursuing a major in elementary education described how her mother forced her to reconsider her decision:

When I decided to look at other careers and honestly it was really...umm... it really was literally my mom sitting down with me and having a talk and she said, "You know I really... I really wanted you to look at other career. I really wanted you to study nursing..." She actually said that to me. "I really want you to study nursing; I really want you to become a nurse. Education is great and all that; but it's not...you're not gonna make a lot of money." GaoJer (Hmong Female)

GaoJer listened to her mother and put her dream of becoming an elementary education teacher on hold. She started to take prerequisite courses for nursing with the intention of pursuing her nursing education after her Bachelor's degree. GaoJer was responding to her mother's pressure; as the oldest child, from a single parent household, she felt responsible for her family's financial well-being.

b) *Significant non-family life event.* A few participants chose college majors and career paths based on significant events experienced outside of the family. For example, GaoJer's goal of becoming an elementary education teacher was influenced by the support and inspiration she received from a former teacher. Her early educational experiences helped to shape a vision in which she could become whatever she wanted to be. GaoJer's goal was to recreate similar opportunities for others. She knew she could make a difference as a teacher and was passionate about her chosen career path.

Growing up, school was the one place I felt safe, the one place that I felt like I could be anybody I wanted to be. And also, school was the one place I felt like I was going somewhere in my life and so it was different for my home environment. I guess growing up, school is a place I loved; I love going to school, I love learning, and I love knowing that I can do something with my life. I guess that is something that a lot of my teacher inspired in me. GaoJer (Hmong Female)

Similar to GaoJer, Ying wanted to dedicate her life to working with youths and helping to validate their voices. Growing up, her thoughts and opinions were not valued because she was considered too young to have opinions that mattered or knowledge to share. As a result, Ying wanted youth to be able to express themselves from an early age;

she wanted them to voice their concerns to elders and be heard. Ying hoped that youths would mature into articulate adults. She believed majoring in youth studies and pursuing a youth work career would allow her to make a difference.

I think it's so important to give youth a voice; I feel like when I was growing up, sometimes I wasn't given that voice or that opportunity to talk because people thought I was like young and ignorant and stupid...you know, not knowledgeable. So I want a lot of youth to have that opportunity; ...so they can be so much more once they get older... because they're not held back. Ying (Hmong Female)

What I Need to Succeed

As participants struggled to navigate the college environment and to determine a major and career path, they needed support to achieve their goals. This theme is composed of two sections, Family Support and Non-family Support. Non-family Support is used to capture the resources first-generation immigrant college students in this study received to make their journey to and through college possible. This ranged from having College Possible Coach help with the college admission process to going to the Multicultural Academic Center (MACE) routinely for advising, tutoring, and peer support. The theme Family Support illustrates the resources participants received from parents and siblings; these ranged from parents expressing pride in their child's accomplishments to siblings offering to pay for the participant's expenses.

Family support. Receiving support from family was important for participants in this study. Specifically, they wanted parents and siblings to offer emotional support and

tangible support such as food, and to understand the college process including the difficulty of maintaining good grades.

a) Encouragement and motivation. Although participants did not want advice from parents about what major or career path to seek, they did want parents to encourage them and serve as a source of motivation for their college journey. Participants wanted their parents to be proud of them for seeking a college education and for breaking the educational barrier for their family. Most participants wanted to know that their parents would be there for them no matter what major or career path they decided to pursue.

For some of the participants who lived on campus, this was the first time being away from their family. Maintaining contact with their parents reduced the student's loneliness and helped them feel supported. Cara explained how receiving a telephone call from her father helped her feel connected to her family.

My dad call me yesterday, because [he] heard [I] just took a test, "How was it? Did you do well on it?" [He] asked me so many questions I haven't heard before. Because I [have] never lived far away from my family; this is my first time. So, they worry about everything. Before I move in here, my brother told me my parents couldn't sleep because they were worried about me. They think, "What could happen if she lives far away? Can she take care of herself?" Cara
(Vietnamese Female)

Because they made the extra effort to stay connected to her and find out about her progress in college, Cara felt supported by her parents. Being immigrants and the first in their families to pursue college, participants struggled through many hurdles and wanted

to give up at times. But motivation from their parents was instrumental to them.

YengKong described an experience of when his mother motivated him to continue his education, even though he wanted to give up.

[My mom told me], “There are a lot of Hmong people in the jungle right now and you are one of those who have the opportunity to come here. Why don’t you use that? A lot of people want to go to school; but they don’t have the chance and you are going to school...” That’s what they told me and after I listen to them, I feel like that’s true. [After listening to her] I want to try harder and every time that I have a problem, she says, “YengKong don’t feel like you’re the only one. There’s other that have this problem you have, but just don’t say it.” And my dad usually says, “YengKong, you do know we are the smartest people right?” YengKong (Hmong Male)

His parent(s) motivated him; their support encouraged him to continue his education and to take advantage of the opportunities given to him. He felt that he needed to be strong for his family and those less fortunate.

b) Unconditional Support. Participants sought unconditional support from parents as they pursued college education. This meant they wanted support from parents that was not contingent upon the major or career path they had chosen. Participants felt that their parents should support them in whatever they chose to pursue (any major, any career path, and all extra-curricular activities) whether the parent approved of their choices or not. In addition, participants wanted parents to offer a listening ear and

comfort when they were struggling with issues; they did not want to be pressured by their parents.

Hien described how she envisioned what unconditional support from her father would sound.

If I want to be theater major, [my father would] just say, “This is how hard it’s going to be; but if you want it, then do it. We are here and when you need us, if you need someone to cry or talk with, we’re here. You know even though it’s not our goal for you, if you love it, go for it.” Hien (Vietnamese Female)

c) *Wanting parents to understand.* Parents did not always understand what their students were going through in college; this put pressure on the participants in the study. Many felt somewhat unsupported when parents had unrealistic expectations for them and did not trust the participant’s decision-making. Since parents did not have Bachelor’s degrees, they did not understand the time commitment to obtaining this degree. Some parents expected their student to finish college in a year. Participants wanted their parents to have more realistic expectations in terms of understanding the difficulty of college and the number of responsibilities the student was juggling while trying to be successful and to achieve their goals. GaoJer explained:

There are high expectations. Sometime they are unbearable and sometime when I’m trying to balance my life, my career and everything else in my life, my family, and school it gets really tiring to live up to other people’s expectations of me. I feel like my mom thinks I have six arms that I can do all these things at once. I realized that she doesn’t understand that part of my life in terms of

juggling my sense of identity with everything else...my school life, my workload, my homework, and everything. GaoJer (Hmong Female)

A few parents saw how their student was struggling in college and started to comprehend the difficulty of college. As a result, they became more supportive emotionally.

In the beginning, they didn't really know and notice, but now we talk about [college] and they know it is harder than it seems. In the beginning, they didn't really understand the situation and asked, "Why is it taking so long?" It is true that it's not as easy as it seems. But, now I feel that they do understand and they're starting to see that and they say to take my time, even when I don't do well in classes and change majors. They're being supportive, even though it's taking this long. Even though they don't understand, they're being supportive.

Nou (Hmong Female)

Participants wanted their parents to trust them. Many felt that they were being scolded unnecessarily when their parents thought they were not focusing on college or were making bad decisions such as partying, getting bad grades, or having bad friends.

Participants felt judged by their parents if they did not meet parental expectations. In order to avoid being judged and experiencing conflict with their parents related to college major or career path, some participants did not disclose what was happening in their lives. Many felt that they were able to choose a major and make career decisions without the input of their parents. The students either avoided conversations about college or they provided surface level information.

I don't like talking about these kind of things [major and careers] to my mom because every time I bring [it up], or every time she brings up... we always have an argument about it. She always wants me to do something that I don't want to do it. Houa (Hmong Female)

d) *Difference in support by parents:* The majority of participants from two parent households faced pressure from one parent to pursue a specific career path, while the other parent was unconditionally supportive of the student's decisions. The parent who pressured participants to a specific career path and was typically more involved in the college process. Tigist explained how she experienced the differences in her parents' support:

It's different between my dad and my mom. I talk more with my dad because he's more concerned. My mom, she's kind of laid back and you can tell her whatever you're doing and she'll say, "OK," but she won't question you or [ask] "What are you doing?" or that kind of stuff. But my dad will say, "What re your grades?" ...I'm a college student. I wouldn't like someone judging me or someone questioning me. My mom, she doesn't do that stuff; but my dad, he still pressures me. Tigist (Ethiopian Female)

e) *Small things matter (tangible support).* In addition to emotional support, parents also supported their students in concrete ways including giving them money, buying new shoes, or cooking a special meal when they were on a break from college. Participants felt that this tangible support demonstrated that their parents cared for and loved them. Cara further explained the meaning she attached to her parents' cooking:

They didn't give me money to go to college I [took] three loans and some financial aid. They didn't do anything; but they show you how much they are worry about you and every time I come home, I have good food because they want me to [be] healthy so I don't get sick. [That way I can do well in school. They show me their love, but they never say, "I LOVE YOU!" I never [say], "I love you to them." We cannot say that, but we show it. Cara (Vietnamese Female)

Similarly to Cara, Joyce's mom did not understand the college process; but, she tried to do small things that would make the college process easier for her daughter, such as providing reminders to complete the application for federal student aid forms (FAFSA) and helping with the right documents.

My mom [would say], "Hey you need to do this." She knows what I need to do, but doesn't know how to do it. She will ask, "Did you apply for FAFSA yet?" Or, she [will] help me apply for FAFSA (because she is the one that has all of the tax stuff). Then, she will ask, "Did you get your report card?" And I will say, "Mom, you don't get report cards in college." She would say, "How are your grades doing?" She knows what's going on, but she doesn't know how to do it. Joyce (Taiwanese Female)

Although both tangible and emotional supports were important for participants, the majority valued emotional support and would choose that over receiving financial support from their parents.

Emotional is more important. Money is money. You can spend it in a day but the emotional relationship with your parents; it's like not going away. Bayani (Filipino Male)

Of the fourteen participants, only one went to a parent for financial support; the majority of the participants did not want to overburden their parents by asking for money. They felt that asking their parents for money would increase the family stress. Ten of the participants had jobs where they worked between 10-32 hours per week.

f) Sibling support. Most participants reported having close relationships with siblings; as a result, the students disclosed more about their college lives to their siblings than to their parents.

They're [my sisters] are just really supportive of me financially, academically, and emotionally... just really being there whenever I need them. Even if like I don't ask them for help; they'll keep bugging me to see if I need help on anything.

Ying (Hmong Female)

Siblings were also a source of financial support; participants were more likely to turn to their siblings than to their parents if a financial need arose.

I was worried about my tuition; I cannot pay for the school and [my brother] told me, "Keep studying and don't worry about money; if you don't have the money to pay, I will quit school and work money to pay for you." And, I cried that night.

Cara (Vietnamese Female)

Before I went to work, I was stressing about [my mid-term exam]. I was planning on taking off work just so I could study. Then, my brother came and talked to me. He said, “You don’t have to worry about it; you got this!” Then he took me out to eat and we were talking about school and everything. He was trying to calm me down, and then at the end he said, “If you want to take off work, I will give you the money if you need it.” Wang-Meng (Hmong Male)

Non-family support. Participants in this study were first-generation immigrant college students navigating and paving their own paths through post-secondary institutions. Since parents were typically not familiar with the college process, the majority of participants sought help about college-specific process from other sources. For help in navigating the college process, most students turned to college advisors, to support systems such as TRiO, College Possible, Upward Bond, or MCAE, to former high school teachers, and to the financial aid offices at their university.

Since parents were less knowledgeable about college majors and processes, advisors or someone outside of the family were most sought after for advice. Getting advice from someone outside their family and community was also a way for students to avoid the pressures to pursue familiar majors. One exception to this case was a participant who wanted career advice from his father; he was disappointed when the support he sought was not given. Additionally, advisors were able to provide more accurate information about what to do in order to pursue a specific major or career path. As Cara, said,

I had a meeting with my advisor [and] she told me what courses I should take, we talk about life. She told me everything; what should I do and what I [should be] concerned about. Like us, she is first-generation college student. Cara
(Vietnamese Female)

Cara felt connected to her advisor since her advisor was also a first-generation college student and could understand some of the challenges she was facing.

Participants also received emotional and academic support from friends when they were stressed about college related issues. Friends were more likely to understand the struggles they were facing while navigating the college process; they empathize with getting a bad grade on an exam as a college student. Participants did not disclose their academic struggles, such as a bad grade to parents; they did not want to disappoint their parents and felt that their parents could not comprehend the pressures that they as students were dealing with on a daily basis. A few of the participants navigated the college process with a sibling who was also attending college.

Discussion

Through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenology (Smith, et al., 2009) and Symbolic Interaction theory (Blumer, 1969; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993), this study explored the experience of selecting college major(s) and career paths and, receiving family support while pursuing a bachelor's degree for first-generation immigrant college students. The two primary themes *What I Want as a Student* and *What I Need to Succeed*, and their related subthemes are discussed in the next sections; these sections connect the findings of the current studies to existing research on this topic.

Changing Majors and Career Path

Consistent with the literature, these first-generation immigrant college students entered college with preconceived ideas about what major was best for them (Syed, 2010). But as in Syed's (2010) study, in some instances they changed majors during the course of their college journey once they realized a) they were not well-suited to master the course content, b) their goals changed, or c) they themselves changed. Some students changed their majors because they were not successful in completing coursework related to the medical field or they subsequently found that they actually had no interest in pursuing a medical career. Perhaps this is because many first-generation immigrant college students are less academically prepared to enter college in areas of math and English, or they had developed poor study habits (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Sora & Stebleton, 2013b). For others, changing major from STEM to a more person-focused major and career grew from a heightened desire to make a difference in their community. As students took classes and participated in co-curricular activities, they had the opportunity to learn more about their own ethnic communities' identity, history, and traditions. When this occurred, they often embraced a passion to pursue degrees such as youth studies and family science; these careers were seen as enabling them to give back to their communities. This is consistent with Syed's (2010) finding that ethnic minority students had a social justice focus and wanted to find solutions to problems in their family and community. These first-generation immigrant college students were passionate about reducing family conflicts and creating stronger communities. As students learned more about different types of majors and careers that were available to

them, this self-awareness and increased knowledge allowed them to make better decisions pertaining to their life's goals. They knew the requirements and commitment of getting certain degrees, for example, STEM degrees, although some of the participants still wants to continue in this area, they knew the commitment and requirements of their degree(s) and were making the decision that was best for them.

Financial Security and Stability

As first-generation immigrant college students from low-income households, participants were familiar with struggles of having limited financial resources and did not want to repeat these difficulties. They wanted to help lift their families out of poverty and to help them attain the American Dream, which meant being able to provide for them financially. They also wanted to make their parents proud and repay them for all of their sacrifices (Suarez-Oriozco & Suarez-Oriozco, 1995). Even though attaining upward mobility was important to the participants in this study, they also wanted to have a career that was meaningful; they did not want to merely work at a job for the money and then be miserable. Similar to Fujii (2012), this study found that first-generation immigrant students placed equal importance on financial security and career satisfaction.

An important difference in the immigrant lived-experiences of the participants in this study as opposed to other first-generation students was that many had been significantly influenced by their family's experience of immigration and being refugees. This is perhaps what drove the participants' parents to push them towards majors that would give them financial stability and a better life than the parent had. Health-related majors and jobs in the medical field were particularly encouraged for a variety of reasons.

Medical occupations were careers known to the parents and these jobs were believed to offer job security and higher incomes. As participants learned more about themselves, attempted coursework in non-science majors, and learned about the array of majors and jobs that were available, they realized that they could attain financial security in non-medical career.

Because parents had a narrower frame of reference than the student, communicating with parents about this change of plans was difficult (Hodge & Mellin, 2010; Fujii, 2012). In fact, many participants experienced conflict in their relationship with their parents; this is a finding similar to that of Lee and Liu (2001). Even though they wanted to balance their parental expectations with their own; participants were still hesitant to talk about their college life with parents; (Fisher & Padmawidjaja, 1999; Tang et al., 1999). While many participants changed as they progressed through college, the pace of change for their family was slower than their own.

Giving back as role models

Consistent with previous studies (Cooper, Dominguez, & Rosas, 2005; Devos & Torres, 2007; Fujii, 2012; Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004; Torres, 2006; Zirkel, 2002), the participants in this study expressed a strong desire to serve as role models for their siblings and their communities; this was something they felt was lacking in their own experience. They wanted to educate others about the college process and what it meant to obtain a Bachelor's degree. Moreover, they wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to pursue a wide array of college majors, many of which were not familiar to parents or others in the community. Participants wanted to show their parent(s) and community, that

with their college major(s), they could make a difference for themselves, their family, and the community, and still live a financially stable life.

Family Support

Participants expected unconditional support from their families that were not contingent upon their college major(s) or career path. They wanted parents to realize the difficulties of the college process and to be proud of them as students. Since parents had not experienced college, participants' felt that parents should trust them to make the decisions pertaining to their own lives (Hodge & Mellin, 2010) and support their decisions.

Participants were hesitant to have conversations with their parents regarding their majors because they felt pressured to pursue a specific path. These conversations typically led to conflict and left students feeling disconnected from family (Hodge & Mellin, 2010; Billson & Terry, 1982; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Fighting with parents made the participant feel frustrated and less supported by family (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). The literature shows that when students feel secure and supportive in their relationship with their parents, they are more satisfied with their college experience and tend to be more successful (Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004). Participants wanted their parents to share in and understand their college experiences; however, getting to a place in their parent-child relationship where this could happen was difficult for many of the participants to envision. They knew it would take time to develop that type of relationship and they were already overwhelmed by their many responsibilities.

Because they did not want to overburden their parents, participants in this study turned to their siblings for financial support. The participants had stronger relationships with their siblings; they felt supported and trusted by their siblings; consequently, they also tended to disclose more about their college lives to siblings. There were a few participants in this study who attended college with a sibling and then they depended on each other to figure out the college process. Siblings offered both emotional and financial support to each other when needed.

Even though participants felt their parents did not really understand their college experiences, they consistently shared that their families supported them in their own way. This was visibly demonstrated by cooking special meals for participants and providing rides to campus. Interestingly, participants expressed a preference for emotional and motivational support over instrumental or financial support. They felt that having a strong relationship with their parents was worth more than money itself.

Utilizing Resources

Realizing that parents are not able to provide the instrumental guidance needed to prepare for and succeed in college, participants used different avenues to get the help and support needed. Many of the participants used resources that were available in their high school and college campuses, including but not limited to College Possible, TRIO, MACE, and students support services. This finding reinforced the need for institutional resources to help underrepresented students successfully navigate the higher education arena (Jehangir, 2010a; Jehangir, 2010b).

Friends and institutional mentors also served a key role in the support system for the participants in this study. Participants understood that their family, especially their parent, was not able to provide the know-how about college; so they sought help from friends and institutional mentors to navigate the process. Friends were sometimes also first-generation immigration college students themselves; they understood the challenges participants were facing in terms of navigation the college process and were able to provide emotional support. Institutional mentors helped navigate the college process with participants in terms of sharing resources, and offering advice. This study's purposed was to capture the family support participants received but discovered that students in this sample only expected certain type of support from family, and sought other resources from non-family sources. Participants understood that their families were not able to guide them through college, so the utilized resources that could provide the guidance needed to succeed.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The literature exploring the experiences of first-generation immigrant college students is scarce. The present study extends a small, but growing body of literature that examines the complexities of being a first-generation college student and an immigrant. Understanding how these two factors are connected will allow practitioners to better serve these students as they pursue a Bachelor's degree.

Literature for first-generation immigrant college students and their decision making pertaining to college majors and career path is also sparse. This study contributes to the developing body of literature demonstrating that the choice of college major and

career path is not only the student's choice, but it is also a family decision. First-generation immigrant college students honored their parent's expectation when making career choices. They wanted to make their parents proud and repay them for their sacrifices. These first-generation immigrant college students struggled to manage their own career aspirations with those of their parents. When working with students of this type, it will be important for practitioners to understand the student-parent relationship, the student's career aspirations, and the career expectations from the parents. Since parents played a significant role in the participants' experience through college, institutions need to consider incorporating family in the college experience. This needs to be done both at the high school and college levels. If families anticipate some of the challenges the participants may face in college, they may be able to help students through these experiences, thus change would be happening both in the family unit and the student. With both units changing, the meaning of a college education could also change for the family and student-parent relationship would be more connected.

The participants in this study provide insight into the need for receiving support from their family and demonstrated that support looks different based on the resources of each family. There is a need for more research in understanding the role of family and its impact on student success. Additionally, in this study one participant was forced to change her major and career path to a path approved by her mother. The participant was the eldest child from a single parent household and felt the burden to provide for her family. Future research should further explore how family structure affects the decisions pertaining to major and career paths for first-generation immigrant college students.

When participants in this study did not receive the support they needed from parents, siblings become the pillars of support, both emotionally and financially. Future studies need to explore the sibling relationship and its impact on the success of first-generation college students. Given the vital role of family in the lives of first-generation immigrant college students, more research is needed to further understand how parents, siblings, and other familial factors of would help these students succeed in college.

Limitations

The phenomenological design of the present study allowed the PI to capture rich, in-depth data about family support as well as data about college majors and career path decision-making for first-generation immigrant college students. However, as was expected, generalization of the findings is not possible. The sample was unique and only representative of participants attending a four-year public university. First-generation immigrant college students attending private institutions and community colleges may have different experiences in terms of receiving family support, selecting majors, and making career decisions. Moreover, since the majority of the participants in this study were single, findings may differ for college students who are married.

Conclusion

This study employed phenomenology as a research approach and symbolic interaction as a grounding theory. Both focus on how individuals create meaning through their experiences. Phenomenology aims to capture *how* individuals make meaning of their experiences. With a combination of assigning meaning, roles, and interactions, symbolic interactions lends itself to explaining how humans experience the world. For

first-generation immigrant college students in this study, attaining a bachelor's degree meant upward mobility for both the student and their family. Moreover, the degree was the first step for the family to achieve financial security.

Through their lived-experiences and their interactions with family, participants assigned meaning to procuring a Bachelor's degree. At the beginning of the college experience, both the participants and their parents had an agreed upon meaning of a college degree; for both it was a mean of obtaining upward mobility. Through personal and educational growth, the participants changed the meaning of a college degree. To them, their education provided opportunities to make a difference in the world, in addition to living a financially secured and stable life.

Parents of first-generation immigrant college students on the other hand had a narrower frame of reference about college majors and career paths based on their lived-experience and the influences of their culture and community and this did not change. To the parents, a college education still meant upward mobility, and just that. They did not understand why the meaning of a college education changed for participants. Because of participants' interactions with their parents who had been shaped by their immigrant and acculturation experiences, participants felt pressured to pursue the career path preferred by their parents. When participants changed their majors and career paths, it consequently changed their interactions with parents. Both parents and students were challenged to redefine their goals and expectations from a primary focus on seeking jobs that promised financial security and status to a focus that also integrated satisfaction and community contribution.

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 14)

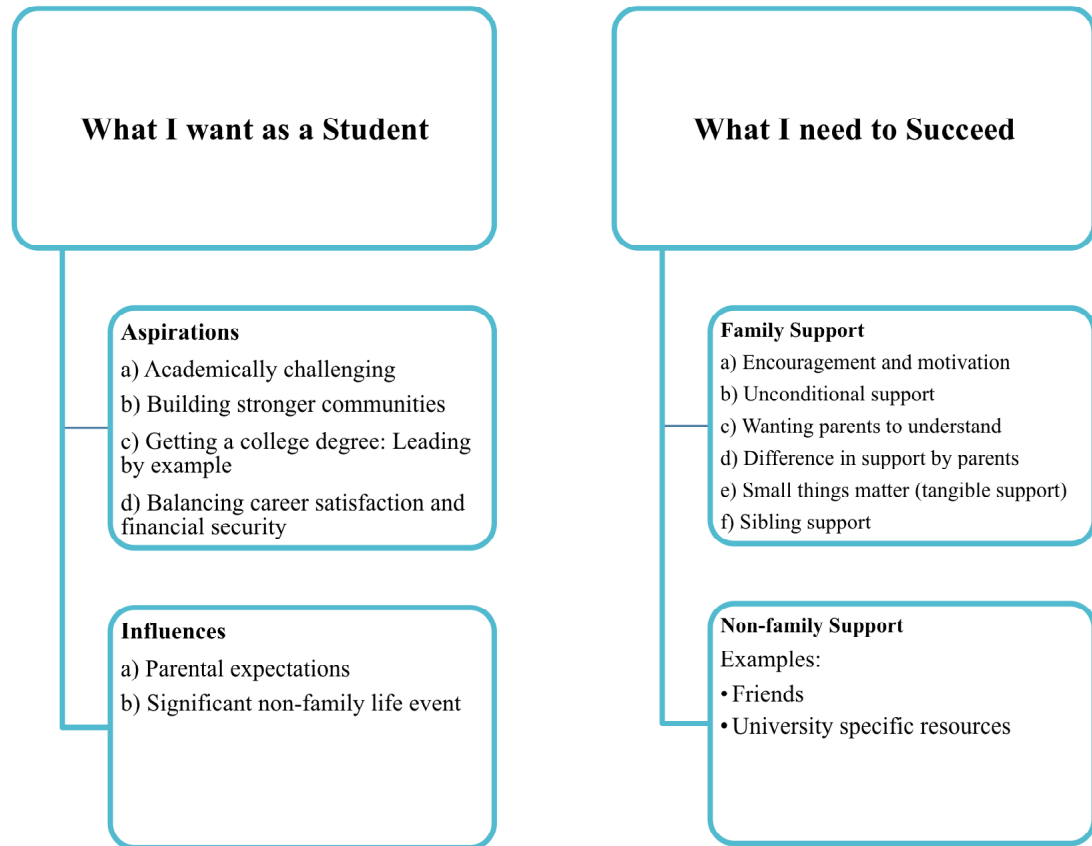
Characteristics	N	Frequencies (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	12		21.29	2.49
Missing	2			
Biological Sex				
Male	5	35.7		
Female	9	64.3		
Marital Status				
Single	13	92.9		
Married	1	7.1		
Family Income				
\$1-16,000	4	28.6		
\$16,001-30,000	4	28.6		
\$30,001-75,000	3	21.4		
\$75,000 and above	1	7.1		
No income	1	7.1		
Missing	1	7.1		
Employment				
Yes	10	71.4		
No	4	28.6		
Hours Worked				
1-10	2	14.3		
11-20	6	42.9		
21-30	1	7.1		
31-40	1	7.1		
Country of Birth				
United States	5	35.7		
Thailand	3	21.4		
Vietnam	2	14.3		
Ethiopia	1	6.7		
Philippines	1	7.1		
Taiwan	1	7.1		
Burma	1	7.1		

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants Pertaining to College (N = 14)

Characteristic	N	Frequencies (%)
College Status		
Freshman	3	21.4
Sophomore	3	21.4
Junior	4	28.6
Senior	4	28.6
Residence During Academic Year		
On Campus	5	35.7
With Parents	7	50.0
Off Campus	2	14.3
College Major		
Child Psychology	2	14.3
Family Social Science	2	14.3
Engineering	1	7.1
Youth Studies	1	7.1
Neuroscience	1	7.1
Computer Science	1	7.1
Recreation and Leisure	1	7.1
Elementary Education	1	7.1
Geography	1	7.1
Undecided	3	21.4

Figure 1: Organization of Themes



Appendix A

Email heading: Participants needed for research project

Hello,

I am a graduate student in the family social department at the University of Minnesota. I am contacting you to participate in my research study aims at understanding immigrant first-generation college student and parent (s) aspirations for them and family support.

Eligibility criteria

- First-generation college student
- You or your parents were born outside of the United States
- Pursuing a Bachelor's at the University of Minnesota

Procedure

- 40-60 minutes interview scheduled based on your time
- Provide parent contact information if you think they will be interested in participating
- The interview will be audio recorded

You and your parent will receive a small cash gift to thank you for your participation.

If you are interested in participating, or have any questions, please contact Veronica Deenanath at 612-940-5160 or deena002@umn.edu

Sincerely,
Veronica Deenanath

Appendix B Recruitment Flyer



Contact Information:

Veronica Deenanath

Department of Family Social Science

Phone:

Email:



Calling Immigrant First- Generation College Students and Parents!

If you are first-generation college student, you are from an immigrant family and you are pursuing a bachelor's degree at the U of M, you and your parents are invited to participate in this research study at the University of Minnesota.

This study aims to understand immigrant first-generation college students and their parents career aspirations for them and family support.

We ask you to participate in a 40-60 minutes interview that will be scheduled based on your availability.

If you think your parents will be interested in participating, we will ask for their contact information, but parent participation is not necessary in order for you to participate.

You and your parent will receive a small cash gift to thank you for your participation.

If you are interested in participating, or if you have questions, please feel free to contact us.

Appendix C Interview Protocol

Intent	Student
Ice-breaker	1. Tell me what it's like to be a first-generation college student?
Factors that influence major/career decisions	1. What are some of the factors you consider when choosing a major? 2. What do you plan to do for a living? Why did you choose for this path?
Understanding the path to a career	1. Tell me more about what you think it takes to achieve your goal? 2. Does your parents understand what it takes to achieve this goal?
Parent's influence on career decision	1. How did your parents influence your career decision?
Relationship with parents	1. What was your relationship like with your parents before you choose your major? 2. What was it like after you choose your major? 3. How did your career choice affect your relationship with your parents?
Family support	1. How does your family support your education? Does this affect your career decision? 2. Can you provide specific examples of how your family supports you? 3. 3. In an ideal situation, what would family support look like to you?
Additional support systems	1. Is there anyone else in your life that supports your education? 2. In what way do they offer support? 3. 3. When you are stress about something related to college, whom do you turn to?

Appendix D

**Understanding Immigrant First-generation College Students and
Parents' Aspirations for them, and Family Support****Student Consent Form****Background and Purpose:**

You are invited to be in a research study with Veronica Deenanath in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of factors affecting career aspirations for immigrant first-generation college students and their parents' career aspirations for them and family support. In order for you to participate in this study, we need to make sure you understand what the study is about, how it will involve you and for how long, the potential risks and benefits, and we will address any questions you may have.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we will meet with you in McNeal Hall at the University of Minnesota. During our meeting, we will ask you basic questions about yourself (i.e. age, gender, career goals, etc.) and your thoughts about factoring affecting your career decision as an immigrant first-generation college student. The interview is estimated to last about an hour. The interview will be recorded to ensure accuracy and a smooth interview process.

Risks of Being in the Study:

There is a minimal risk for you to be in this study. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions we ask but you are not required to answer any question(s) you don't like. Since this is a voluntary study, you will not be pressured to be in this study if you do not want to. If you decide to be in this study, we will not pressure you to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering. You are free to pull out of the study at anytime without hurting your present or future relationships with the University of Minnesota, Veronica Deenanath, or Dr. Catherine Solheim. There is no direct benefit for participating in this study.

Compensation:

By participating in this voluntary study, you will receive \$15 as compensation for your time and thoughts.

Confidentiality:

All information we get from you will be saved in a secured file (i.e., CEHD

Shared Data) and assigned an identification number to replace your name in a computer program immediately. When we write reports based on your interviews, we will not use your name to make sure no one knows who you are. After the study is done, the interviews will be kept confidential for another year for us to study. All interviews will be destroyed or deleted after two years.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether to be in the study will not hurt your current or future relations with Veronica Deenanath, Dr. Catherine Solheim, or the University of Minnesota. If you decide to be in the study, you are free withdraw from participating at any time and still receive the \$5 compensation.

Contacts and Questions:

You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have. If you have questions or concerns about this study and would like to talk to someone other than Veronica Deenanath or Dr. Catherine Solheim, please contact the Research Subjects' Advocate line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware Street Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; telephone (612) 625-1650.

Statement of Consent:

I have heard the researcher or the person who is doing this study read and explains the above information. I have asked questions and have gotten answers. I give my permission to be in this study.

Subject's Signature

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix E

Understanding Immigrant First-generation College Students, and Parents' Career Aspirations for them, and Family Support

Student Demographic Survey

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to each question and mark the answer to the appropriate box (or write the response in the space provided).

1. What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

2. When were you born? _____

(Month/Year)

3. Where were you born? _____

(City if known)

(Country)

4. If born outside the U.S., at what age did you move to the United States?

5. How much is your estimated family's annual income?

☐ \$1 – \$16,000

☐ \$16,001 –
\$30,000

☐ \$30,001 – \$75,000

☐ \$75,000 and
above

6. What is your marital status?

☐ Married

☐ Legally Separated

☐ Divorced

☐ Single

7. Do you have any children?

☐ Yes, how many? _____

☐ No

8. Where do you live during the school year?

Check all that applies

☐ On campus

☐ Off campus

With friends

With parents and/or
siblings

With spouse and in-laws

With spouse

9. Do you have a job?

☐ Yes, how many hours do you work per week? _____

☐ No

10. What year are you in your college career?

☐ Freshman

☐ Sophomore

☐ Junior

☐ Senior

☐ Other

11. What is your major? _____

12. What is your career goal? _____

13. How do you pay for your education?

Check all that applies:

☐ Scholarships ☐ Loans ☐ Work ☐ Parents ☐ Other

14. Who do you turn to for advice and support while you pursue your education?

15. Of these people, who gives you the most support? _____